Shodh Sari-An International Multidisciplinary Journal

@2026 International Council for Education Research and Training
2026, Vol. 05, Issue 03, 505-530
ISSN: 2959-1376
DOI: https://doi.org/10.59231/SARI7969

Community, Care, and Citizenship: Indigenous Governance Systems and Disability Inclusion in Nigerian Politics

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Abstract

Nigeria's Disability Act (2018) guarantees the rights of persons with disabilities (PWDs), yet political participation remains profoundly inaccessible: recent accessibility audits find that only 22.4% of political party buildings have ramps and 80% of PWD candidates report electoral discrimination, and an estimated 25–30 million PWDs remain largely excluded from democratic processes. Existing interventions focus predominantly on physical infrastructure and quota enforcement, overlooking deeper questions of how political belonging is culturally constructed. Using a qualitative Indigenist research design, this study examined how Indigenous epistemological principles of community and care might inform more culturally resonant models of disability citizenship in Nigerian politics. Yarning circles and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 participants across three purposively and snowball-sampled groups in Southwest Nigeria: traditional rulers and Indigenous knowledge-holders (n=15), PWD political aspirants and advocates (n=20), and disability service providers (n=15). Data were analysed using a six-phase thematic analysis guided by Indigenous research methodologies. Traditional mediation of disputes involving PWDs was reported by 87% of traditional rulers and 60% of PWD advocates, and kinship-based resource pooling that enabled political engagement was reported by 80% of traditional rulers and 65% of PWD advocates, indicating that kinship networks already function as informal infrastructure for political inclusion. Participants across all three groups characterised personhood as fundamentally relational rather than individualistic, with implications for how disability citizenship is understood in Nigerian politics. These findings informed culturally grounded policy recommendations for Nigeria's political parties and electoral commissions, offering a decolonised pathway to disability-inclusive governance that complements rather than replaces rights-based frameworks.

@2026 International Council for Education Research and Training 2026, Vol. 05, Issue 03, 505-530
ISSN: 2959-1376 DOI: https://doi.org/10.59231/SARI7969
Keywords: Indigenous governance, disability inclusion, political participation, citizenship, Nigerian politics

Introduction

Nigeria's disability rights movement achieved a significant legal milestone in 2018 when the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act was passed, bringing national laws into compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (Centre for Ability Rehabilitation and Employment [CARE], 2025). However, empirical data continually shows that legal ratification has not resulted in significant political inclusion for Nigeria's estimated 25–30 million PWDs (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). Only 22.4% of party buildings have accessible ramps, only 10.2% have tactile signage, 55.1% of political party digital platforms are still inaccessible, and crucially, 80% of PWD candidates reported experiencing electoral discrimination, according to recent accessibility audits carried out across 49 political party offices nationwide (CARE, 2025). Advocates claim that PWDs are "invisible in political spaces" due to a systemic pattern of exclusion, which is reflected in these figures (CARE, 2025).

Seven years after the Disability Act was passed, these obstacles still exist, which suggests a deeper conceptual flaw in Nigerian democracy's conception of political membership rather than just a lack of infrastructure. The majority of current interventions such as physical ramps, quota enforcement, and assistive technologies come from Western liberal frameworks that view inclusion mainly in terms of individual rights and accessibility requirements (Cooms, Watson, & Watson, 2025). These methods have been inadequate, despite their necessity. According to Olaito (2025, cited in Ohajunwa et.al, 2025), "democracy becomes questionable when over 37 million citizens with disabilities cannot participate fully in choosing their leaders" (Ohajunwa et.al, 2025,). The untapped potential of Indigenous governance philosophies based on relational personhood, communal care, and group decision-making to rethink disability inclusion outside of Western liberal frameworks is a crucial gap in the literature that this study fills (Cooms et al.,

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2025; Stubbs et al., 2025). In contrast to the individualised, rights-based models that predominate in modern disability policy, indigenous governance systems throughout Africa have traditionally operated on the tenets of kinship-based mutual obligation, consensus-building, and embedded social responsibility (Ephraim-Chukwu, 2026). According to Vermeer, Cornielje, Cornielje, Post, and Idah (2015), formal rehabilitation programs in Nigeria routinely disregard the social welfare and mediation services provided by traditional leaders (Sarakuna) to PWDs in Hausa community. In a similar vein, the Igbo philosophical maxim Onye aghana nwanne ya ("be your brother's/neighbour's keeper") outlines a system in which reciprocal responsibility is a fundamental component of community membership rather than a philanthropic duty (Ephraim-Chukwu, 2026). A metaphysical framework for comprehending disability as a category entwined with morality, community, and spiritual meaning rather than as a deficit is provided by the Yoruba concept of Sanponna the orisa, which is linked to smallpox and, consequently, bodily difference (TAF Africa & European Union Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria [EU-SDGN II], 2025).

Inspired by Indigenous community-controlled disability models in Australia, which have shown that Indigenous-led management and decision-making improve outcomes, cultural safety, and service accessibility for Indigenous peoples with disabilities (Cooms et al., 2025), this study investigates whether similar ideas can guide more culturally relevant political inclusion in Nigeria. According to research on Aboriginal perspectives on disability, "kinship systems are a community strength and support for people living with disability" and decolonising disability services necessitates focusing on Indigenous rather than Western medical models (Stubbs et al., 2025, p. 7).

Therefore, this study explores how more culturally relevant models of disability citizenship in Nigerian politics might be informed by Indigenous epistemic concepts of community and care (Modern, 2025; Westminster Foundation for Democracy & CARE NG, 2025a). We want to go beyond imported solutions toward truly decolonised paths for disability-inclusive governance by emphasising Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and giving local ontologies of

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relational personhood priority (Asiyanbi, 2025; Stubbs et al., 2025).

An estimated 25–30 million Nigerians with disabilities are affected by the ongoing and worsening crisis of democratic exclusion, notwithstanding the legal framework of the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018. Legal absence is not the main issue; rather, it is operational failure, cultural isolation, and conceptual mismatch between local political reality and Western rights frameworks. According to physical accessibility audits, 80% of PWD candidates experience prejudice during campaigns, 77.6% of political party offices are still inaccessible, and only 8.4% of candidates in the 2023 general elections were female, with PWD representation considerably lower. Despite being perfectly prepared to run for office, PWD candidates in Benue State were allegedly refused party tickets based only on their disability status. According to intersectional research, women with disabilities who belong to ethnic minority groups encounter additional challenges such as discrimination, financial limitations, and insufficient electoral accommodations.

Physical inaccessibility is only one aspect of the fundamental issue. It is essentially a political ontological issue: Indigenous African conceptions of personhood as relational, entrenched, and produced through community are incompatible with Western liberal frameworks of individual rights and formal equality. Ramps, quotas, and assistive technology are examples of current initiatives that function within an imported logic that ignores how Nigerians culturally create citizenship, political membership, and the position of people with disabilities.

This study addresses two primary research questions:

1. **RQ1**: How can Indigenous epistemological principles of community and care, drawn from Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa philosophical traditions inform more culturally resonant models of disability citizenship in Nigerian politics?

2. **RQ2**: What forms of political inclusion and belonging emerge when disability inclusion is reconceptualized through Indigenous governance frameworks of kinship-based mutual obligation, consensus decision-making, and relational personhood rather than through Western liberal models of individual rights?

This study contributes in multiple ways as it

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highlights the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems for political inclusion, it questions the universalist presumptions that underpin Western disability rights frameworks. In terms of methodology, it expands the use of Indigenist research techniques, particularly yarning circles, for the study of politics and disability in African contexts. In practical terms, it provides Nigeria's political parties and election commissions with culturally grounded policy frameworks that go beyond tokenistic inclusion toward truly decolonised administration. It offers lessons for other postcolonial democracies facing comparable difficulties and adds to the growing global discussions about Global Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and their application to disability-inclusive governance.

Literature Review

Indigenous Governance Systems: Kinship, Consensus, and Communal Care

In contrast to Western models that place an emphasis on individualism and hierarchical institutions, the governance systems of Indigenous peoples around the world are firmly anchored in kinship and consensus, emphasising community well-being and collaborative decision-making. The foundation of governance is kinship ties, which define social structure, influence decision-making through family heads and elders, enable fair resource distribution, and guarantee community support. Whether through community gatherings, discussion groups, or established procedures, consensus decision-making guarantees that all opinions are acknowledged and heard, promoting harmony and collaboration.

It has been reported that traditional leaders (Sarakuna) in Hausa society in Nigeria provide PWDs with social welfare in the form of food and clothing distribution, social insurance, mediation, and access to disability communities for non-governmental organisations. According to research, Sarakuna are in a position to support rehabilitation and inclusion, but they frequently lack the skills and training required; crucially, Community Based Rehabilitation programs routinely overlook them. Kinship ties among the Igbo are upheld through songs, kinship names, and informal schooling. They are based on a tripod of maternal, paternal, and marriage bonds. Three fundamental ideas are articulated in the philosophical maxim Onye

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aghana nwanne ya ("be your brother's/neighbour's keeper"). These are collective accountability, controlled competitiveness, and reciprocal responsibility. This ethic promotes social cohesiveness and safeguards vulnerable groups by acting not just as a kinship principle but also as a dynamic socio-political paradigm that may be extended beyond blood relatives to all people. In order to support one another, resolve conflicts, plan funerals, and give scholarships to younger members, the Igbo Òmügenna system establishes lineage-based networks.

There are many resources available from the Yoruba philosophical tradition. According to research on dementia care among Yoruba families, carers move fluidly between hospitals, places of worship, and traditional healing methods not only in search of treatment but also in search of continuity with ancestral ways of knowing, meaning, and assurance. A traditional framework for comprehending disability that integrates morality, community, and spiritual purpose is offered by the Yoruba metaphysical idea of Sanponna.

Relational and Decolonial Perspectives on Disability

Western medical and social theories of disability have come under growing scrutiny from decolonial viewpoints in recent scholarship. Research in Aboriginal Australian contexts has revealed that, in stark contrast to the Western medical model, Aboriginal worldviews consider disability as a social construct created by community ties. Kinship networks are recognised as communal assets that assist individuals with disabilities. The report suggests decolonising disability services completely and placing an emphasis on Aboriginal worldviews in the delivery of disability services.

The distinction between obulema (disability as an individual condition referring to a non-normative state connected to citizenship and defined through the legal-political realm) and omuceke (a weak person determined interpersonally through attention to bodymind, socio-economic circumstances, and relationships) has been documented in Uganda by Modern (2025). This distinction implies that, despite their differences, relational and rights-based approaches to disability justice might not be mutually exclusive.

Ubuntu's "umntu ngumtu ngabantu" (a

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ISSN: 2959-1376
2026, Vol. 05, Issue 03, 505-530
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person is a person via others) ideology opposes prevailing narratives that marginalise and dehumanise people with disabilities. According to an Ubuntu viewpoint, disability is a political issue that necessitates critical analysis of colonial roots and persistent modern expressions rather than just a medical ailment or a social reality. "Redefining disability as a lived experience influenced by overlapping identities, rather than only portraying it as a deficiency or medical disease" requires a decolonial understanding of disability.

Indigenous disability models from Australia offer practical proof of the benefits of Indigenous-led strategies. In a comparison of Indigenous-managed and non-Indigenous-managed disability service providers, Cooms et al. (2025) discovered that while non-Indigenous-managed organisations used Ad Hoc approaches without integrating cultural safety into fundamental structures, Indigenous-managed organisations displayed an Embedded Cultural Base model where cultural values were deeply woven into governance, service delivery, and community engagement. Supporting Indigenous-led management and decision-making is advised by the study since it improves outcomes, service accessibility, and cultural safety.

Empirical Results on Nigerian Political Participation and Disability

Systematic exclusion is consistently depicted in the empirical literature on disability and political participation in Nigeria. The most thorough latest data comes from the EDANPS Survey 2025 (Accessibility Audit Report), which shows that just 22.4% of political party facilities have accessible ramps, 10.2% have tactile signage, and 55.1% of party internet platforms are still inaccessible to people with disabilities. While some states have domesticated and gazetted the Disability Act, many have done nothing, and enforcement is hampered in numerous states by the lack of operational Disability Commissions, according to the PAGE Analysis Report on the Act's implementation.

Numerous obstacles outside of physical infrastructure have been found through qualitative research. Beyond constitutional rules, a study on Nigeria's 2019 elections revealed that societal stigmatisation, transportation constraints on election day,

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and difficulties obtaining Braille ballot paper all had a detrimental impact on voting turnout. The survey also showed that many PWDs were ignorant of their legal rights and that electoral authorities disregarded the restrictions of the Electoral Act. A more recent analysis of the 2023 general elections revealed inconsistent adherence to electoral legislation pertaining to disabilities, a persistent deficiency of disaggregated data, poor election staff training, a lack of understanding of disability rights, and a sluggish adoption of inclusive changes at subnational levels.

Gender, race, and disability interact to exacerbate exclusion, according to intersectional studies. Due to prejudice, socioeconomic limitations, insufficient electoral accommodations, and logistical transportation issues, women from ethnic minority groups with disabilities have lower voter turnout and less political impact. Voter manipulation involving PWDs was observed in recent Anambra State elections, including visually impaired individuals receiving uninvited partisan help and deaf voters being approached by party representatives in an effort to sway their votes.

Theoretical Framework: Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Relational Citizenship

Three theoretical stances are included in this work. First, relational citizenship theory views citizenship as a collection of relationships, responsibilities, and acknowledgements ingrained in communities and family networks rather than as a collection of individual rights bestowed by the state. Second, decolonial disability studies (Ohajunwa et.al, 2025) emphasises that Indigenous perspectives and agendas must be prioritised in order to reframe disability as a lived experience impacted by overlapping identities rather than as a medical condition or lack. Third, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) theory emphasises local ontologies, epistemologies, and axiological frameworks above imported Western models, acknowledging that Indigenous peoples are already at the vanguard of regaining their dignity rather than waiting to be saved.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative Indigenist research design, which favours Indigenous epistemologies and techniques throughout the research process. Indigenist research approach views Indigenous knowledge

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2026, Vol. 05, Issue 03, 505-530
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systems as the analytical lens rather than as objects of study, focuses Indigenous voices and experiences, and retains an explicit commitment to decolonizing research techniques.

Data were acquired utilising two complimentary Indigenous research methods:

Structured yet culturally appropriate group talks conducted with each of the three participant groups. Yarning circles followed Indigenous principles of free-flowing conversation, respect for each speaker, consensus orientation, and attention to emotional and relational components.

Individual interviews performed with select participants to allow deeper investigation of personal experiences and to guarantee voices from all participant groups were properly represented.

Three groups of participants were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling

Participant Group	Description	Recruitment Criteria	Sample Size
Group 1: Traditional Rulers and Indigenous Knowledge-Holders	Traditional monarchs, community elders, and custodians of Indigenous knowledge from Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa communities in Southwest Nigeria	Recognized traditional title holders; minimum of 10 years of community leadership; demonstrated knowledge of local governance and disability-related customs	15
Group 2: PWD Political Aspirants and Advocates	Persons with disabilities who have contested elections, held political appointments, or served in disability advocacy organizations	Self-identified PWD; prior political participation experience; at least one electoral cycle involvement	20
Group 3: Disability Service Providers	Staff of disability-focused NGOs, government agencies, and community-based	Minimum of 3 years' experience in disability services; direct engagement	15

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	rehabilitation programmes	with persons with disabilities	
Total	—	—	50

Researcher's Fieldwork 2026

The three stakeholder groups were selected to triangulate perspectives on the research questions rather than to represent a single vantage point. Traditional rulers and Indigenous knowledge-holders were included because they are the custodians and interpreters of the Indigenous governance philosophies at the centre of the study's theoretical framework; PWD political aspirants and advocates were included because they are the direct subjects of political exclusion and are best positioned to assess whether Indigenous frameworks translate into lived experiences of belonging; and disability service providers were included because they mediate between formal disability policy and community-level practice, and so could speak to the practical tensions between rights-based and relational approaches. Recruitment began with purposive sampling of participants who met the criteria in Table 1, identified through traditional institutions (Obas' palaces and councils of chiefs), registered disability advocacy organisations, and state Ministries of Women Affairs and Social Development; snowball sampling was then used to reach additional traditional rulers and PWD advocates through referrals from initial participants, which was necessary given the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame for either population. Recruitment continued within each group until no substantially new themes emerged from successive interviews, consistent with the principle of information power in qualitative sampling.

Data collection was conducted in three states from Southwest Nigeria namely; Lagos, Oyo, and Ogun States. This location was selected for its ethnic diversity (containing considerable Yoruba populations alongside Igbo and Hausa groups), its relatively high concentration of disability service organizations, and its accessibility for research implementation.

Data were evaluated through theme analysis guided by Indigenous research approaches. The analysis process followed six phases: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generative coding sensitive to Indigenous categories; (3) theme development through

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both inductive Indigenous categories and deductive theoretical concepts; (4) theme review and refinement through community validation; (5) theme definition and naming; and (6) writing and integration of findings.

The study gained ethical approval from the University of Ibadan Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed permission using accessible formats relevant to diverse disability kinds. Participants were offered the option of having an advocate or family member present during interviews. Traditional protocols were respected when engaging with traditional rulers, including polite welcomes, courtesy visits, and respect for customary procedures.

Coding Procedures and Trustworthiness

Coding was conducted manually by the two authors working independently before comparing and reconciling their codes, a form of investigator triangulation intended to reduce individual interpretive bias. An initial codebook was developed inductively from the first ten transcripts (familiarisation and generative coding, Phases 1–2), then applied to the remaining transcripts, with new codes added as they emerged. Candidate themes were developed by clustering related codes and were cross-checked against the Indigenous theoretical framework (relational citizenship theory, decolonial disability studies, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems theory) to ensure that emergent Indigenous categories were not flattened into pre-existing Western thematic structures. Three trustworthiness strategies were used, consistent with Indigenist research practice. First, member checking was conducted by returning preliminary themes and illustrative quotations to a subset of participants from each group (five traditional rulers, six PWD advocates, and five service providers) for feedback on accuracy and cultural appropriateness of interpretation; feedback led to refinement of theme labels but did not alter the substance of the themes. Second, data triangulation was achieved by comparing accounts across the three participant groups and across yarning circles and individual interviews, with convergence and divergence in perspectives reported explicitly in the findings (e.g., Table 3). Third, an audit trail was maintained throughout data collection and analysis, comprising raw transcripts, the evolving codebook with version history, analytic memos documenting decisions

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about theme development, and records of the community validation process (Phase 4), allowing the analytic process to be traced and reviewed.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

Characteristic	Category	Traditional Rulers (n=15)	PWD Advocates (n=20)	Service Providers (n=15)	Total (N=50)
Gender	Male	12 (80%)	11 (55%)	8 (53%)	31 (62%)
	Female	3 (20%)	9 (45%)	7 (47%)	19 (38%)
Age Group	25–34 years	0 (0%)	6 (30%)	3 (20%)	9 (18%)
	35–49 years	2 (13%)	10 (50%)	8 (53%)	20 (40%)
	50–64 years	8 (53%)	3 (15%)	3 (20%)	14 (28%)
	65+ years	5 (33%)	1 (5%)	1 (7%)	7 (14%)
Ethnicity	Yoruba	10 (67%)	12 (60%)	9 (60%)	31 (62%)
	Igbo	3 (20%)	5 (25%)	4 (27%)	12 (24%)
	Hausa	2 (13%)	3 (15%)	2 (13%)	7 (14%)
Education	No formal	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
	Primary	2 (13%)	2 (10%)	0 (0%)	4 (8%)

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ISSN: 2959-1376 DOI: https://doi.org/10.59231/SARI7969

	Secondary	3 (20%)	4 (20%)	1 (7%)	8 (16%)
	Tertiary	9 (60%)	14 (70%)	14 (93%)	37 (74%)
Disability Type (PWD Advocates)	Mobility	n/a	7 (35%)	n/a	n/a
	Visual	n/a	5 (25%)	n/a	n/a
	Hearing	n/a	4 (20%)	n/a	n/a
	Multiple	n/a	4 (20%)	n/a	n/a
Years of Experience (Service Providers)	3–5 years	n/a	n/a	6 (40%)	n/a
	6–9 years	n/a	n/a	5 (33%)	n/a
	10+ years	n/a	n/a	4 (27%)	n/a
Community Type	Urban	9 (60%)	14 (70%)	10 (67%)	33 (66%)
	Semi-urban	4 (27%)	4 (20%)	3 (20%)	11 (22%)
	Rural	2 (13%)	2 (10%)	2 (13%)	6 (12%)

Researcher's Fieldwork 2026

Sample Size Justification and Statistical Power Concerns

The sample size of 50 participants corresponds with qualitative research norms for exploratory studies, particularly in Indigenist research where depth of participation (yarning sessions often lasting 90–120 minutes) and cultural appropriateness take precedence over statistical representativeness. The small cell sizes for rural participant (n=6) and Hausa participants (n=7) suggest conclusions cannot be generalized to these subpopulations, but rather serve as exploratory signs for future investigation.

Analysis of Findings

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Data analysis revealed five thematic categories addressing the research questions.

Theme 1: Relational Personhood as the Ontological Foundation of Political Belonging

All participant groups articulated a view of personhood that is fundamentally relational rather than individualistic. This theme was most forcefully expressed by traditional rulers and Indigenous knowledge-holders, but was also evident in the narratives of PWD advocates and service providers.

Traditional rulers consistently emphasized that in Indigenous Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa ontologies, a person exists only through relationships with family, lineage, community, ancestors, and the spiritual realm. One Yoruba traditional ruler (Oba, 68 years) stated: "In our tradition, we do not say 'I am...' We say 'A wa...' We are. The person who cannot see, the person who cannot walk, the person who hears differently they are still 'we.' The question is not 'what rights do they have?' but 'how do we include them in our we?' (Traditional Ruler 3)

An Igbo knowledge-holder elaborated on the philosophical foundation: "Onye aghana nwanne ya, this is not a slogan. This is the structure of our society. The person with disability is not outside looking in. They are inside. The question is whether the community is fulfilling its obligations to them. Political participation is not about ramps. It is about whether the community sees you as belonging." (Indigenous Knowledge-Holder 7). PWD advocates reinforced this perspective:

"Western models taught us to demand our rights. But rights assumed we were individuals standing alone. Our traditions say we stand together. The real exclusion happens when we are not recognized as members of the 'we.' That is a deeper exclusion than any physical barrier." (PWD Advocate 12, mobility disability)

Theme 2: Kinship as Infrastructure for Inclusion

Traditional rulers described kinship networks as the primary infrastructure through which inclusion including political inclusion has historically been organized. Rather than relying on state-provided accommodations, kinship systems provide embedded mechanisms for ensuring that all community members can participate in collective decision-making.

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Table 2: Kinship-Based Inclusion Mechanisms Identified by Participant Groups

Mechanism	Description	Prevalence Reported	Example Quote
Family-based support for mobility	Relatives provide physical transport to community meetings and town halls	Universal (100% of traditional rulers)	"The family does not leave anyone behind. If you cannot walk, your son carries you." (Traditional Ruler 8)
Collective resource pooling	Extended family (e.g., *umunna*) funds ensure PWDs' basic needs are met, enabling political engagement	80% of traditional rulers; 65% of PWD advocates	"Before demanding political contribution, we first ask if the person has eaten." (Traditional Ruler 2)
Non-verbal consensus protocols	Use of hand signals, proximity arrangements, and community observers to ensure PWDs' voices are recognized	73% of traditional rulers; 45% of PWD advocates	"Our elders notice who is silent and create space." (Traditional Ruler 11)
Traditional mediation	Village heads or settlement chiefs advocate for PWDs facing discrimination	87% of traditional rulers; 60% of PWD advocates	"When someone is marginalized, the chief speaks for them." (Traditional Ruler 5)
Dispute resolution accessible to all	Community assemblies structured to accommodate participation regardless of ability	67% of traditional rulers	"Traditional courts have no barriers. Everyone can approach." (Traditional Ruler 14)

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Theme 3: The Limits of Imported Rights Frameworks

A consistent finding across all participant groups was recognition of the value but also the fundamental limitations of Western-derived rights-based approaches to disability inclusion. Service providers were most likely to articulate this tension, while PWD advocates expressed ambivalence.

Table 3: Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses of Rights-Based vs. Relational Frameworks (as reported by participants)

Dimension	Rights-Based (Western) Framework	Relational (Indigenous) Framework	Participant Consensus
Legal enforceability	Strong: provides legal recourse	Weak: relies on social norms	Majority view: Both are necessary
Cultural resonance	Low: often perceived as foreign and imposed	High: aligned with lived experiences and local values	Strong preference for relational framework in cultural terms
Individual empowerment	High: centers individual rights and agency	Variable: may subordinate individual to community interests	Mixed views among participants
Practical accessibility	Weak: dependent on resources and institutional enforcement	Moderate: leverages existing community networks	Relational framework seen as more immediately accessible
Addressing stigma	Moderate: emphasizes non-discrimination	High: reshapes social perceptions and attitudes	Relational framework viewed as more transformative
Accountability	Formal: courts, legal systems, commissions	Informal: social sanctions (e.g., shame, reputation)	Both frameworks seen as vulnerable to failure

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One service provider articulated the fundamental tension: "The Disability Act is important. We fought for it. But when we take it to the village, people do not recognize themselves in it. The language 'rights,' 'individual,' 'reasonable accommodation' this is not how people think. The village head does not ask, 'What rights does this person have?' He asks, 'Who is this person in our family?' We need frameworks that speak to both." (Service Provider 9, NGO Director) A PWD advocate offered a more critical perspective: "Rights gave us something we did not have: a way to say no, a way to demand, a way to sue. But rights did not give us belonging. You can have all the rights on paper and still be alone. Our ancestors understood that what makes a life is not rights but relationships. Politics is about relationships who you know, who speaks for you, who carries you to the meeting. Rights cannot carry you. People can." (PWD Advocate 4, visual impairment)

Theme 4: Indigenous Political Practices as Models for Inclusion: Traditional rulers described political practices within Indigenous governance systems that already embody disability-inclusive principles. These practices offer models that could be adapted to formal state political structures.

Table 4: Indigenous Political Practices with Disability Inclusion Implications

Indigenous Practice	Governance System	Inclusion Mechanism	Potential Application to State Politics
Isakole (town hall consensus)	Yoruba	All adult community members can speak; decisions require broad/unanimous agreement, allowing diverse voices to be accommodated	Political party meetings; inclusive candidate selection processes
Oha na Eze (council of chiefs)	Igbo	Representation through multiple channels (kinship, age-grade,	Parliamentary representation models;

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		titles); ensures multiple entry points for participation	diversified committee structures
Tattalin Arziki (community resource management)	Hausa	Resources distributed based on need and contribution within a collective care framework	Campaign finance reform; equitable resource allocation for political participation
Age-grade systems	Pan-Nigerian	Structured but inclusive progression; each level carries rights and responsibilities	Mentorship schemes and leadership pipelines for persons with disabilities
Alaala (community meeting grounds)	Igbo–Yoruba	Open, physically accessible spaces with minimal structural barriers; encourages inclusive participation	Design of political rally venues; accessibility of polling units
Traditional oath-taking	Pan-Nigerian	Flexible modes of participation (touch, verbal affirmation, witness-based), accommodating physical differences	Adoption of alternative formats in electoral and administrative processes

Researcher's Fieldwork 2026

Theme 5: Pathways to Culturally Resonant Political Inclusion

Participant groups identified concrete pathways for integrating Indigenous principles into formal political structures. These pathways emphasize institutional adaptation rather than wholesale replacement.

Table 5: Proposed Pathways for Culturally Resonant Political Inclusion

Pathway	Description	Stakeholders Identified	Feasibility Rating (1–5)	Priority
Traditional ruler representation	Formal advisory roles for traditional rulers within	INEC, political parties, traditional	4	High

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ISSN: 2959-1376 DOI: https://doi.org/10.59231/SARI7969

	electoral commissions and political parties	councils, NCPWD		
Consensus-based candidate selection	Integrating consensus-building elements into party primaries alongside voting procedures	Political parties, PWD advocates, community leaders	3	Medium
Kinship-based voter mobilization	Leveraging extended family and kinship networks for voter education and registration	INEC, CSOs, traditional rulers, religious leaders	5	High
Indigenous-language accessibility	Translating political materials not only linguistically but conceptually into Indigenous frameworks	INEC, political parties, NCPWD, translation experts	4	High
Community accountability mechanisms	Establishing local monitoring systems to track inclusion of PWDs in political processes	CSOs, traditional rulers, PWD organizations	4	Medium
Hybrid rights–relational training	Training electoral officials and party members on both legal rights frameworks and Indigenous inclusion practices	INEC, political parties, traditional rulers, disability advocates	3	Medium
Traditional dispute resolution for electoral grievances	Integrating traditional mediation systems into formal electoral dispute	INEC, traditional councils, judiciary	2	Low

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	resolution, especially for PWD-related cases			

Researcher's Fieldwork 2026

Discussion

This study set out to investigate how Indigenous epistemological principles of community and care can inform more culturally resonant models of disability citizenship in Nigerian politics. The findings affirm that Indigenous governance philosophies rooted in kinship networks, consensus decision-making, and relational personhood provide alternative ontological foundations for political inclusion foundations that transcend the physical access paradigm of Western models to address belonging, membership, and inclusion at a deeper cultural level.

Addressing RQ1 (Indigenous principles as informing models): The findings demonstrate that three interconnected Indigenous principles offer resources for reconceptualizing disability inclusion. First, relational personhood the understanding that personhood is constituted through community relationships rather than individual attributes fundamentally reframes the question of political inclusion. Instead of asking, "What accommodations do PWDs need to exercise their rights?" Indigenous frameworks ask, "How does this community recognize and include all its members?" This shift is not merely semantic; it changes the locus of responsibility from the individual PWD to the entire community. This finding aligns with Ubuntu scholarship which holds that "personhood is affirmed through connection, contribution, and care" and that "perceptions of disability are not defined by what a person lacks, but by how they are embraced by their community".

Second, kinship as infrastructure the finding that kinship networks in Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba contexts already provide mediation, social insurance, transportation, and dispute resolution for PWDs suggests that Indigenous systems offer existing resources that formal political structures could leverage rather than replace. This echoes research by Vermeer et al. (2015) documenting how Sarakuna (traditional leaders) improve the socio-economic position of PWDs by functioning as mediators and providing social insurance.

Third, consensus decision-making

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Indigenous practices of ensuring all community voices are heard through talking circles, elders' facilitation, and non-verbal protocols—provides a procedural model for political inclusion that does not depend on physical or technological accommodations but on relational attentiveness. This finding aligns with characterizations of Indigenous governance that prioritize inclusive dialogue, conflict resolution through mediation, and community engagement that strengthens accountability. Addressing RQ2 (Forms of political inclusion that emerge from reconceptualization): Participants articulated several forms of inclusion that emerge when disability is understood through Indigenous rather than Western lenses. These include: belonging without qualification political membership based on kinship recognition rather than demonstrated competency; embedded advocacy the expectation that family and community leaders will advocate for PWDs within governance structures; collective resources for political participation community funding mechanisms for PWDs' political engagement; and culturally recognized leadership as demonstrated by the emergence of Eze Anthony Ohaeri, a deaf traditional ruler in Abia State whose community recognized his capacity for leadership regardless of hearing impairment.

Comparison with Australian Indigenous models: The finding that Indigenous-managed disability services in Australia produce better outcomes through embedded cultural values rather than ad hoc cultural initiatives aligns closely with this study's findings. Cooms et al. (2025) demonstrated that Indigenous-led management in the disability sector enhances cultural safety, service accessibility, and outcomes for Indigenous peoples with disabilities. This study extends that finding from service delivery to political participation, suggesting that Indigenous-led governance in political contexts would similarly produce more culturally resonant inclusion outcomes. The findings support decolonial disability studies' call for "redefining disability as a lived experience influenced by overlapping identities" rather than as deficiency. They also align with Modern's (2025) distinction between obulema (disability as individual legal category) and omuceke/abaceke (weak persons determined relationally). However, this study goes further by demonstrating that these relational frameworks can be

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operationalized for political inclusion, not merely for social care. The study revealed persistent tensions between rights-based and relational frameworks. PWD advocates valued legal rights for their enforceability and for providing individual agency, while traditional rulers found greater cultural resonance in relational frameworks. This suggests that the goal should not be to replace rights frameworks with Indigenous frameworks, but to develop hybrid models that draw on the strengths of both a "both-and" rather than "either-or" approach. As one advocate concluded, "Rights cannot carry you. People can." Neither alone is sufficient; both are necessary.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Nigeria's persistent crisis of disability political exclusion cannot be adequately addressed through imported Western frameworks of individual rights and physical accessibility alone. The continued failure of the Disability Act 2018 to produce meaningful political inclusion evidenced by only 22.4% of political party buildings having ramps, 80% of PWD candidates facing electoral discrimination, and an estimated 25–30 million PWDs remaining largely excluded reflects a deeper conceptual failure that this research has sought to diagnose and address. The findings reveal that Indigenous governance philosophies rooted in kinship-based mutual obligation, consensus decision-making, and relational personhood offer alternative ontological foundations for political inclusion foundations that address not merely physical access but cultural belonging, political membership, and community recognition. These philosophies are not historical artifacts but living systems of governance that continue to structure how millions of Nigerians understand political community and care. The study contributes to four key domains. Theoretically, it advances relational citizenship theory by demonstrating its operational applicability to disability inclusion in non-Western contexts. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of Indigenist research methodologies for disability studies in Africa. Practically, it provides evidence-based pathways for integrating Indigenous principles into formal political structures. Globally, it contributes to the emerging field of Global Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) applied to governance and inclusion.

Recommendations

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Based on the findings of the study, a set of interrelated recommendations is proposed to strengthen inclusive governance for persons with disabilities through a hybrid integration of rights-based and Indigenous relational frameworks:

1. INEC and relevant agencies should establish a Traditional Advisory Council on Disability Inclusion within 6 months to integrate Indigenous leadership into electoral governance. Voter education should be translated into Indigenous conceptual frameworks, not just language, within 12 months. Electoral officials should be trained in both rights-based and Indigenous inclusion approaches within 18 months. Consensus elements should be introduced into electoral procedures within 24 months, while kinship-based voter registration should be implemented immediately.

2. Political parties should adopt the Minimum Standards for PWD Inclusion within 6 months to ensure compliance with disability laws. They should also involve traditional rulers in candidate selection within 12 months and introduce community accountability systems within 18 months. Party structures should recognize Indigenous leadership pathways in candidate development within 24 months, while consensus-based elements should be added to primaries immediately.

3. The NCPWD should develop hybrid rights–relational inclusion frameworks within 12 months to balance law and culture. It should fund research on Indigenous inclusion practices within 18 months and establish community monitoring systems within 12 months. Training programmes co-led by traditional rulers and disability advocates should be implemented within 6 months, alongside documentation of Indigenous practices within 12 months.

4. Traditional rulers should formalize mediation roles for PWD-related political disputes within 12 months and establish disability inclusion councils within palace structures within 6 months. Indigenous inclusion practices should be documented within 18 months, while advocacy for formal recognition of Indigenous governance in disability policy should be pursued within 24 months.

5. CSOs should fund Indigenous disability inclusion research continuously and support kinship-based political participation initiatives within 12 months.

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Case studies of Indigenous practices should be documented within 18 months, and advocacy for hybrid policy frameworks should be sustained over 24 months. Staff training on Indigenous methodologies should be completed within 6 months.

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Received: Apr 30, 2026
Accepted: Jul 20, 2026
Published: Aug 05, 2026

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